Chapter 23
Iberian Anarchism in Environmental History

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23.1 Introduction

Following a renewed interest in anarchism in both social movements and critical academic circles, a growing volume of academic research has vindicated anarchist traditions of thought and increasingly applied an anarchist lens to geography since the early 2010s (see, e.g. Springer et al., 2012; Springer, 2013; Ferretti et al., 2018). As a rich theoretical tradition entangled with praxis, anarchism has the power to illuminate environmental, ethical and political issues faced by our societies today, and inform alternatives. When tracing the historical genealogy of anarchist thought and praxis during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Carl Levy pointed to the Paris Commune and “red and black Barcelona” as the most powerful examples of anarchist political action, underlining the role of cities for the transformation of philosophical anarchism into daily practice (Levy, 2018). Despite anarchist organisations in Spain having been repressed during the Francoist dictatorship, anarchist-inspired practices extend to present-day Barcelona. While these have not been central to the research of the Barcelona school of ecological economics and political ecology, several theoretical influences of anarchism and inspiration from local social movements can be identified.

In this chapter I adopt a historical approach to trace and make explicit some of these influences. I start by highlighting the attention devoted to Spanish anarchism and the 1936 revolution by researchers and thinkers interested in the relation between social anarchism and the environment in the 1970s. Next, by focusing on the emergence of political ecology and environmental history in Spain during the 1990s, I examine Eduard Masjuan’s research on human ecology and Iberian anarchism, first developed in the journal Ecología Política. Masjuan’s doctoral research,
supervised by Joan Martínez-Alier, delved into the rich debates on urbanism and birth control that took place in anarchist circles from Catalonia to Latin America between 1860 and 1937. His writings constitute an essential reference to explore the environmental dimensions of anarchism and have informed degrowth discussions on population and the collective ethics of self-limitation. Yet, despite the impact of Masjuan’s research, I argue that an environmental history and political ecology of the 1936 revolution that focuses on practices of self-management, mutual aid and direct democracy is still to be written. I show some examples of work that has been done so far, from urban water management under anarcho-syndicalist principles to collectivised urban agriculture. Finally, I point out that, while not always acknowledged, the influence of anarchist practices can also be found in the research on today’s social movements carried out at the Barcelona school of political ecology and ecological economics.

23.2 Environmental Perspectives from Iberian Anarchism

The experiences of Iberian anarchism have shaped radical approaches to social and environmental matters. During the 1960s, Murray Bookchin coined the term “social ecology” in developing an anarchist perspective on environmental problems, arguing that social hierarchies and different types of domination lay at the core of environmental conflicts. Essays like “Ecology and revolutionary thought” (1964) – later included in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Bookchin, 1986 [1971]) – circulated widely in the countercultural movement of the 1960s–1970s. Interested in decentralisation, self-management and mutual aid, Bookchin delved into Spanish anarchism during this period, systematically collecting sources and interviewing exiled anarchists during his visit to Europe in 1967. The resulting book – *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years* – was a history of the anarchist movement in Spain from 1868 to the 1936 revolution and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (Bookchin, 1977).

A year after the release of Bookchin’s work on Spanish anarchism, the radical journal of geography *Antipode* published a special issue on the relation between social anarchism and the environment, devoting several articles to the 1936 revolution (Breitbart, 1978b). This issue has been referred to as one of the last examples of radical geography scholar engagement with anarchism before a long hiatus during the 1980s and 1990s (Springer et al., 2012). Closely involved in its preparation, together with Myrna Breitbart and Richard Peet, was Maria Dolors García-Ramon, a professor from the Geography Department of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, who pioneered radical geography research in Spain (Albet et al., 2019).

Back in 1978, Myrna Breitbart summarised the importance of the 1936 revolution, stating that “Spain is the only country in the twentieth century where anarcho-communism and anarcho-syndicalism were adopted extensively as revolutionary theories and practices in urban and rural areas” (Breitbart, 1978c: 60). Breitbart’s own doctoral research focused on the concept of decentralism in the Spanish revolution (Breitbart, 1978a, d). Other articles in the special issue included a study of the
collectivisation of industries in Catalonia during the war (Amsden, 1978), while Maria Dolors García-Ramon examined the theoretical contributions to spatial theory from Spanish anarchists (Garcia-Ramon, 1978). The special issue also included an article on the resurgence of the libertarian movement after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, a review of Mary Nash’s book on the women-only anarchist organisation Mujeres Libres (1975), works on Kropotkin and Reclus, reprints of Kropotkin’s essay “What geography ought to be” and Bookchin’s “Ecology and revolutionary thought”.

Anarchist perspectives in geography almost disappeared from international publications during the 1980s and 1990s (Springer, 2013). In Spain, however, the intertwined development of the fields of political ecology and environmental history was a fertile ground for budding research on the socioenvironmental dimensions of Iberian anarchism.

23.3 Iberian Anarchism at the Crossroads of Environmental History and Political Ecology

The foundation of the journal Ecología Política (1991) by Joan Martínez-Alier and Anna Monjo has been described as one of the key factors for the coalescence of environmental history in the Catalan context (Martí Escayol, 2019). The vision of environmentalism as “inscribed in a long tradition of emancipatory social struggle” was already explicit in Martínez-Alier’s first editorial, thus signalling an interest in history. From Martínez-Alier’s viewpoint, environmentalism should not be conceived as a novelty of the countercultural 1970s, because before that “rural and urban social movements that have opposed and oppose exploitation have often been environmentalist movements” (Martínez Alier, 1991: 8–9). Accordingly, during the very same years that Ecología Política was taking off, Martínez-Alier also co-edited, together with Manuel González de Molina, one of the first special issues on history and ecology published by a Spanish journal of contemporary history. By examining social conflicts as ecological conflicts, motivated by the inequalities in the access to natural resources and services, Martínez-Alier conceived the contribution of environmental history as a renovation of social history (Martínez Alier, 1993). Such a perspective opened the space to reassess the social dimensions of historical anarchism from an environmental standpoint.

Anarchism was a key part of the political education and intellectual interests of both founders of Ecología Política. During the 1980s, Anna Monjo began her doctoral research about the experience of anarchist industrial workers in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, presenting her thesis in 1993 (Monjo & Vega, 1986; Monjo, 1993, 2003). Since 1988, Monjo worked at the publishing house Icaria, the publisher of Ecología Política, which she eventually came to manage. Martínez-Alier – who refers to himself as a “moderate anarchist” in his memoirs – has acknowledged the political impact of his time spent collaborating with the
publishing house Ruedo Ibérico during the 1960s and 1970s (Martínez-Alier, 2019). Ruedo Ibérico was established in 1961 in Paris by Spanish exiles and led by the anarcho-syndicalist José Martínez Guerricabeitia (1921–1986).

During the final years of the Francoist dictatorship, Ruedo Ibérico published dozens of key works from diverse anti-Francoist movements that challenged the official historiography established by the Spanish dictatorship, including Martínez-Alier’s own PhD thesis (Martínez-Alier, 1968; Sarría Buil, 2019). Together with José Manuel Naredo, who had a strong influence on the development of ecological economics, Martínez-Alier participated in editing the last issues of the journal Cuadernos de Ruedo Ibérico between 1975 and 1979, a period when this publication adopted a more anarchist and environmentalist standpoint (Naredo, 2008; Martínez-Alier, 2019). Until the early 1980s, Martínez-Alier also published regularly in the anarchist periodical Bicicleta (1977–1982). While these influences have not developed into an explicit anarchist scholarship, the influence of anarchist perspectives in Martínez-Alier’s academic work is evident in his emphasis on peasant agriculture, his hope for disruptive grassroots movements or his distrust of state-based politics. The monumental, collective task of compiling thousands of cases of ecological distribution conflicts in the Environmental Justice Atlas – increasingly portrayed by Martínez-Alier not as an inventory but as an “archive” of environmental justice struggles – is reminiscent of Max Nettlau’s efforts to compile a vast collection of documents and archival records to capture the history of anarchism (Gorostiza, 2014).

The interest of Ecología Política in exploring grassroots environmentalism and emancipatory social movements made it a good fit for the first insights from Eduard Masjuan’s research on human ecology and Iberian anarchism between 1860 and 1937. This was part of his PhD thesis on the topic, supervised by Martínez-Alier (Masjuan, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998). Masjuan’s contribution focused on Catalan anarchism but paid special attention to the international circulation of these ideas, both in and from the Iberian Peninsula and beyond, particularly in Latin America. First, he examined the “organic” tradition of urbanism within Iberian anarchism, connecting local figures to the genealogy of Patrick Geddes and Élisée Reclus. This also involved an analysis of decentralisation and the ideas of “free municipality” (municipio libre) and “free commune” (comuna libre) as the basic unit of anarchist social organisation, emancipated from the State and federated with other municipalities or communes (Masjuan, 2000: 172–176).

Masjuan’s second main contribution was a nuanced discussion of the self-proclaimed “Neo-Malthusian” movement for birth control within Iberian anarchism and in Latin America (Masjuan, 2000). Around the 1870s, despite Thomas Malthus’s fervent opposition to the idea of birth control, the notion of “Malthusianism” had ironically become associated with it (Kallis, 2019). Masjuan documented the circulation of “Neo-Malthusian” ideas within the anarchist movement, from Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia to Emma Goldman. These self-proclaimed “Neo-Malthusians” advocated for birth control or “conscious procreation”, explaining poverty not by excess population but by social inequality. Instead of advocating for population policies from above, they preached women’s freedom to choose how many children
they wanted to have, disseminated contraception measures and challenged religious and state authorities calling for a “womb strike”. In supporting “conscious procreation” to prevent the exploitation of women’s bodies to produce soldiers and cheap labour, this bottom-up movement was explicitly anti-militaristic and anti-capitalist (Masjuan, 2000).

Published by Icaria – the publishing house directed by Anna Monjo – Masjuan’s book *La ecología humana en el anarquismo ibérico* (2000) has been widely cited and constitutes an essential reference to start exploring the socioenvironmental dimensions of Iberian anarchism between 1860 and 1937. Its influence is well apparent in Martínez-Alier’s work during the late 1990s and early 2000s (see for instance Martínez-Alier, 1996, 2002: 51–53). Moreover, it has informed degrowth discussions on population and the collective ethics of self-limitation (Kallis & March, 2015; Martínez-Alier, 2015; Kallis, 2019). Nonetheless, Masjuan’s focus on the decades preceding the Spanish Civil War leaves an ample space for further historical research. Most of all, while he highlighted the rural and industrial collectivisations of the 1936 revolution as one of the great achievements and legacies of Iberian anarchism, few works from an environmental history or political ecology perspective have delved into this period.

### 23.4 Anarchism in the City: Barcelona and the 1936 Revolution

The military coup against the government of the Second Spanish Republic on 18 July 1936 marked the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Aimed at crushing any resistance as fast as possible, the insurrection encountered with the dogged resistance of working-class unions and loyalist forces. In Barcelona, the militants of the main anarchist organisations, the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) and the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI), were at the forefront of the street fights, which ended with the defeat of the insurgent troops after 2 days of combat. The CNT, a confederation of anarcho-syndicalist labour unions, established an anti-fascist coalition with the rest of Catalan leftist parties. During the first months of the war, the anarchists controlled the regional government in practice, and engaged in a deep transformation of economic and social life, which included the collectivisation of agricultural and industrial activities and many small businesses throughout Catalonia and Aragon. Most of the companies were immediately seized and self-managed by their workers (Castells Durán, 1993; Balcells, 2017). The failed military coup thus ignited a revolution and a civil war that extended until 1939.

In the late 1970s, Bookchin underlined that the work of self-managed anarchist collectives made the Spanish revolution distinct, “challenging [to] popular notions of a libertarian society as an unworkable utopia”. Bookchin pointed out how these collectives simultaneously represented the climax and the tragic end of several decades of anarcho-syndicalist tradition in Spain. “To anyone with a concern for
novel social forms, the Anarchist collectives of Spain raise many fascinating questions: how were the collective farms and factories established? How well did they work? Did they create any administrative difficulties?” (Bookchin, 1977: 1–2). Since Bookchin posed these questions more than 40 years ago, historical research on anarchism in Spain and anarcho-syndicalist collectives during the Spanish Civil War has significantly expanded (see among many others Bernecker, 1992; Cattini & Santacana, 2002; Ealham, 2005; Castillo, 2016; Balcells, 2017). However, an environmental history and political ecology of the 1936 revolution is still to be written.

Such a task requires examining the anarchist takeover, reorganisation and daily management of industries, agriculture, transport, energy and water supply services. The anarcho-syndicalist current of anarchism, particularly strong in Catalonia, Aragon and Andalusia, and the principles of self-management, mutual aid, direct action and direct democracy are of special interest here. The management of water supply in Barcelona during the war is a case in point. Following the work of both Maria Dolores Garcia-Ramon (1978) and Eduard Masjuan (2000), research on the collectivisation of the Barcelona private water utility has examined the management of a common good under a model that was neither public nor private (Gorostiza et al., 2013). Seized by the CNT during the first days of the war, the private water company Aigües de Barcelona was collectivised and self-managed by its workers throughout the conflict. The company launched reforms to increase access to water throughout the city, improved workers’ salaries and reduced working hours. The mansion and private gardens of the company’s director (today’s Parc de les Aigües, in El Guinardó neighbourhood) became a school for the workers’ children. Urban water consumption increased in Barcelona throughout the war, even if the collectivised company experienced growing difficulties to replace workers called to the battlefront and maintain water supply under the air raids carried out by fascist forces. These difficulties worsened with the occupation of the Pyrenees hydropower plants by Franco’s insurgent troops, which forced the company to resort to the old, coal-powered steam engines to pump and distribute water. The collectivised water company faced increasing costs that obliged them to raise water prices towards the end of the war (Masjuan et al., 2008; Gorostiza et al., 2013; Gorostiza, 2019).

The difficulties experienced by the collectivised water company also bring to light the water–energy–food nexus. The growing demand of water from urban agriculture eventually became a problem for the daily management of water supply. Early after the beginning of the war, CNT’s neighbourhood committees occupied monasteries and their adjacent lands in Barcelona and started to cultivate them. With these and other lands in five neighbourhoods, the CNT organised the Col·lectivitat Agrícola de Barcelona i el seu radi (Agricultural Collective of Barcelona), employing more than 2000 workers that took care of nearly 850 hectares of land. In addition to this collective, many citizens started cultivating vacant plots as the war progressed and food supply dwindled. These and other gardeners often tapped into the water distribution network, to the extent that the collectivised water company issued warnings to avoid excess use that jeopardised water distribution to houses and hospitals (Gorostiza, 2019; Camps-Calvet et al., 2021, 2022).
The collectivised Barcelona water company or the Agricultural Collective of Barcelona are just two examples of anarchist collectives that can be studied through the lens of environmental history. With more than 75% of the industries collectivised in Barcelona and many other examples of workers’ self-management throughout Catalonia, Aragon and Andalusia, there are plenty of cases to be studied to address the questions posed by Bookchin in the late 1970s and explore political ecology approaches in historical perspective. Moreover, and unlike in the 1970s, today the CNT’s archival collections are available at the Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (Sant Cugat) and the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) and have been partly digitised.

23.5 Conclusions: Radical Imaginaries from the Past

In this chapter I traced the emergence of the research on Iberian anarchism and the environment intertwined with the establishment of political ecology and environmental history in Spain. The intellectual influence of Eduard Masjuan is visible in many works of ecological economics and political ecology authored by Joan Martínez-Alier and the fast-expanding research on degrowth, among others. Moreover, I have highlighted that there is ample research to be developed on the environmental history of anarchist collectives during the Spanish Civil War. This investigation can contribute to more deeply understanding collective organisation, focusing on the role of self-management, mutual aid and direct democracy in past socio-ecological struggles, and giving insights relevant for the current multiple crisis. Through an anarchist approach that emphasises prefigurative practices, a historical study of these collectives may make it possible “to embed within territorial practices certain organisational functions and structures that are at once effective in building spaces of struggle and developing modes of organisation that prefigure future worlds” (Ince, 2012: 9; cited in Ferretti & García-Álvarez, 2019).

Beyond intellectual influences and gaps in historical research, it is important to point out the connection between researchers at the Barcelona school of ecological economics and political ecology and the city’s social movements. Researchers who are directly engaged with (and participated in) local social movements have also been shaped by the political climate of Barcelona. Some have explicitly acknowledged the influences of anarchism or anarchist-connected values in social movements. Claudio Cattaneo and Marc Gavalda have highlighted the anarchist ideals in the strong urban and rural squatting movement (Cattaneo & Gavalda, 2010). The squatted masia of Can Masdeu, in the hills of Collserola, has frequently hosted degrowth and environmental justice events. Giorgos Kallis and Hug March have pointed out how the Cooperativa Integral Catalana is explicitly inspired by the anarchist tradition and the collectives of the Spanish Civil War (Kallis & March, 2015). In other cases, such influences can be inferred but are not explicitly engaged with. Viviana Asara’s research on the radical imaginaries of 15-M (Asara, 2020) has underlined the legacy of workers’ associations before the Civil War and pointed to
values such as mutual aid, direct participation or solidarity, which directly connect to the anarchist ethos and practices. The “fertile soil” for sustainability-related community initiatives that Filka Sekulova and her co-authors have studied in Barcelona connects to the anarchist past and present of the city. This speaks to the metaphor of “anarchist humus” in which degrowth practices flourish, invoked by Giacomo D’Alisa (Sekulova et al., 2017; D’Alisa, 2019).

These connections to Barcelona could be engaged with much more in environmental justice, political ecology and degrowth research, building both on social movement practices in the city today and the intellectual legacies of anarchism before and during the Spanish Civil War. When unearthing the nuanced anarchist environmental debates in the 1900s, Eduard Masjuan was concerned not only with this past, which was silenced during the Francoist dictatorship and beyond, but also with the relevance of these ideas in the present and future (Masjuan, 2000). Internationally too, anarchist geographers today reclaim the relevance of figures such as Kropotkin or Reclus whilst calling for a view towards the future (Springer, 2013). As put by Marc Dalmau from the cooperative La Ciutat Invisible in the Sants neighbourhood of Barcelona, researching mutual aid practices of the city’s past, such as cooperatives, has been “a way of generating reference points relevant for the present, feeding the imagination and providing us with roots which can enable us to build to a future based on greater social justice” (cited in Bibby, 2019; see Dalmau Torvà & Miró i Acedo, 2010).

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